

UNITED STATES ARMY CHAPLAIN CENTER AND SCHOOL

THE CHAPLAIN AND THE ADOLESCENT
IN GROUP COUNSELING

A RESEARCH PAPER

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a new world that is moving fast. We live in a new day that is crowded with new people, new ideas, new sounds, and new triumphs. We see and hear what appear to be new men and tall men reaching beyond the planet. And this new, crowded, and fast world is very young. The chapel community can still serve as a setting in which our youth find their wholeness in Jesus Christ, their dependence upon the crucified, risen and ruling Lord; a setting from which young people can be helped to see and respond to His love, His new fast world, and His mission for them. This paper is designed to explore the method of group counseling for the purpose of helping the young person, or adolescent, within our community. The importance and difficulties of growing through the adolescent years is clearly understood when one author writes:

Viewing adolescence simply as a period of transition between childhood and adulthood tends to diminish emphasis upon those unique features which justify the identification as a separate stage of development. Adolescence is more than the emergence of earlier unresolved sexual and aggressive conflicts. Adolescence is a significant part of life and period in life, and it can and does create singular complexities. The emphasis on adolescence as a period of great stress for the young person tends to obscure the fact that it is equally difficult for his parents and teachers.¹

¹Sandor Lorand and Henry I. Schneer, eds., Adolescents: Psycho-analytic Approach to Problems and Therapy. p.ix.

CHAPTER I

UNDERSTANDING THE ADOLESCENT

Before one can even begin to set up a group counseling situation with adolescents, it is important to have some understanding of the period, culture, and goals of the adolescent.

The period of adolescence involves a number of things. Great change takes place from childhood to adulthood and becomes crucial in the life of the young person as we clearly see in the words of one author:

It is common knowledge that adolescence is one of the most turbulent periods in the entire lifetime of the individual. In a short span of time physiological and psychological changes of tremendous magnitude take place. The effects of these changes on the adolescent himself and the implications of such changes for the parents have been well described by others.²

Furthermore, youth have to establish identities as adults. They have to decide what types of roles they are going to play socially, sexually, and occupationally. And somewhere along the line youth will separate themselves from their families. This presents often a serious problem as one writer states:

We hear only too often about the depression of parents, the emptiness of the home, and the loss of goals when the teen-ager finally leaves for college or to pursue his own life.³

Secondly, it is important to understand the culture and background of the adolescent. He is unable to be independent such as working and earning money and leaving home. He can't marry before a certain age and

²Ibid., p. 273.

³Ibid., p. 284.

assume family responsibility and he can't move about freely in or out of his community.

Besides the young person's restrictions he also has responsibilities. Sometimes they are too many to handle properly. Other times they are not enough. Very often the degree of responsibility for a share of supervision and support is out of balance. Furthermore, the social, economic, cultural, and educational standards of each adolescent will all be different.

Finally, we often fail to understand the adolescent because we fail to understand what his goals are. He wants to be the kind of person he wants to be. He wants to understand what is expected of him and how he will function with his own as well as with those of the opposite sex. It's important for him to develop self-confidence and to learn to understand human action and respond accordingly. He wishes to have the ability to recognize opportunity realistically in the world around him and to adopt his own standards and values, involving himself with others and giving as well as receiving help.

CHAPTER II

THE GROUP COUNSELING PROGRAM

The group program is especially useful in working with adolescents because they are at a period in life in which they are trying to establish their position with relation to the adult world. They have mixed feelings towards adults and are in need of support and assistance from their peers. This is emphasized so well by Sandor Lorand and Henry Schneer:

The turmoil of teen-agers, their jumpiness, excitement, doubts, and despair-attributes which are common to adolescents everywhere. . . . theirs is a problem which has always existed; it belongs inextricably to the life cycle, and because it does, it impinges upon the consciousness of the adult community.⁴

In the first place, the development of a group can be accomplished by personal selection on the part of the chaplain as a result of private and individual counseling with either the adolescent or the parents or both. It is realized, of course, that acceptance on the part of the individual adolescent toward a group counseling situation can be for different reasons. He might have the feeling of a need for help. Or he might just want to seek out "lots of fun" or hope the group can be stimulating in many ways, or even wish that there can be an opportunity for some close friendship with another member of the group. Then again he might simply be forced to attend a group session because his parents or law enforcement said so.

In the second place, it is imperative to know the kinds of group counseling programs. There is the orientation group where specific

⁴Ibid., p. 346.

information is disseminated and the members consider the implications and applications for themselves. There is also the problem-related group where specific problems of concern are dealt with, presenting the possibilities for dealing with them and the feelings and attitudes towards them. Then there is the discussion group for general life-adjustments that can demand change. This group can help members work through their difficulties and bring about changes for readjusting ways of life.

Open or closed groups are also worth considering although both have their advantages as well as their disadvantages. The chaplain as counselor needs to decide what would be most beneficial to his group taking into account the subject matter to be discussed. One writer has summed it up this way:

The question of open or closed groups is one that needs to be considered and some experimentation in this area is necessary. This is important because some persons may feel uncomfortable when new members are added in the course of the group life.⁵

When it comes to open-ended groups another writer has remarked:

. . . the relationship of members to each other and to the group is likely to be less intense; and termination is on an individual basis rather than a group operation.⁶

⁵S. R. Slavson, Analytic Group Psychotherapy with Children, Adolescents, and Adults. p. 243.

⁶Beryce W. MacLennan and Naomi Felsenfeld, Group Counseling and Psychotherapy with Adolescents. p. 62.

CHAPTER III

THE GROUP PROCESS IN ADOLESCENTS

There is a process of development in adolescent groups as there is in all groups of different ages. From the beginning of the group to its conclusion there are basic standards and ways of behaving that the adolescent creates within the group which in turn sets up the dynamics for interaction. It is first noticed at the beginning of a group that adolescents wish to be independent yet prefer and expect the counselor and chaplain to structure the group. Yet when it comes to independence one writer comments:

. . . he(adolescent) needs, therefore, people upon whom he can depend on if he becomes frightened, but who will not demand continued dependency when he feels more assured and adequate in an independent role.⁷

In the second place, a proper amount of structuring is important when it comes to group counseling with adolescents since too much structure in the operation of a group can foster too much dependency.

In the third place, and contrary to adult and parental opinions, adolescents are able to assume responsibility in making some plans after the initial confusion and a few group sessions have passed. Chaplains must continually remind themselves of this fact and extreme patience is required on the part of the counselor. Group beginnings often struggle and they have typical concerns that involve mutual identification, trust and confidence, acceptance, admittance of existing problems, and lots of anxieties.

Testing the leader and the group is another common process among

⁷Irene M. Josselyn, The Adolescent and His World. p. 77.

adolescents. The members will gripe and complain about authority whether it be parental or non-parental and they will often be critical about everything and everyone. The group leader will be attacked verbally by direct or indirect methods, challenged with things the group members know are not allowable, angered if that is also possible, used as an opportunity for resenting other authorities, and coerced to get involved in delinquent acts. Furthermore, group members will attack other members by attempting to drive them out of the group, complaining to others or blaming others for anything and everything, making scapegoats out of other members, and arguing constantly.

Nevertheless, the group members must learn to recognize differences. The chaplain as leader has an important task and responsibility in bringing to the attention of the group members that they need to know that differences are natural and their concern for each other is a willingness to cope with problems. The group leader is not perfect either so group members should also be able to make mistakes and learn to face those mistakes.

Young people are also adept in avoiding involvement with the therapeutic process. Arguing over unimportant issues not relative to the goals of the group is often a cover-up for avoiding the real issues. A member or members might dominate the discussion for a number of reasons. They want attention or want to avoid a disturbing subject that could be threatening to them, or even are so preoccupied with themselves and their own problems that they exclude other group members.

Another way of avoiding involvement is by remaining silent. This can be a symptom of apathy but should not be confused with apathy. Very often there are complex reasons why a particular individual does not open up or talk in the group. Adolescents often experience difficulty in

expressing their feelings because of tremendous anxiety problems.

Avoiding involvement by means of restlessness should also be kept in mind by the chaplain who counsels adolescents in group situations. Restlessness can be communicated in a non-verbal way by moving around or trying to leave the room, by slouching and pushing chairs away from the group, and by spontaneous giggling for no apparent reasons. And adolescents can also express their feelings and attitudes of restlessness verbally such as engaging in horseplay or constant whispering and meaningless chatter.

Finally, young people are specially adept in ways and means of seeking attention, and this also can serve as a form of avoiding involvement in the group process. Youth can work hard and be exceptionally good. Sometimes they might try to win the favor of the leader, and remaining silent might turn the attention of the chaplain to them. Other times they will seek attention by demonstrating disruptive behavior or even acting stupid.

CHAPTER IV

WHAT ADOLESCENTS WANT TO DISCUSS

All adolescents are concerned with questions of who they are, where they are going, their relationship with others of the same sex as well as of the opposite sex. They are likely to experiment in all areas of their everyday living as they seek to establish their identities and their goals. As a result, in any counseling group, young people want to discuss certain common concerns.

The first of these can be the relationship to parental and non-parental authority. Love and respect from the adult world of authority are most important. Without this support it is difficult for the adolescent to love and respect himself. Young people resent being treated differently by adults. I refer to the suspicion and mistrust that is so often prevalent in our society today and that is often directed toward the adolescent. Parents frequently don't allow and trust their teen-agers to try different things even if it means making mistakes. One psychiatrist has expressed this in the following way:

There he waits, champing at the bit, full of energy, drive, and curiosity, intrigued and tempted by the publicly advertised advantages of adulthood. Yet, he is asked to forego the pleasures that he sees the adults all around him engaging in freely. . . . And how does it prepare the adolescent for the world of adult responsibilities when he is given no opportunities to test, to try, to experience, to learn by doing? By what magic do we expect this growing adolescent, denied opportunities for the participation that teaches, suddenly to emerge on the stage of adulthood, full-fledged, capable, mature, and responsible?⁸

⁸Roy Menninger, "What Troubles Our Troubled Youth," Mental Hygiene, XXXIV (July 1969), p. 325

A second common concern that young people want to discuss in, or for that matter outside, a group relationship is sex and dating. For youth to talk about sex openly in the counseling group is a must. Such discussion can overcome western society's "hang-up" about bringing sex out into the open because "it's dirty." And dealing with sexual feelings and matters can bring a positive closeness to the counseling group. Adolescents want to know how to manage their sexual feelings and their relationships that develop with members of the opposite sex.

A third concern and also of primary interest to the young person is dating. He wants to know the limitations of petting and what is supposed to be right and wrong. And he must be helped to understand the implications of sexual involvement all the way to include the sexual act.

A fourth concern is that young people are always looking for the answers to the questions of love. They enquire, "How do you know when you are really in love?" And closely related to love is the interest in ways of selecting a partner for life; what marriage means and all that it implies. One author has so clearly defined what it can be like to fall in love:

. . . I apologized like a madman, because the band was starting a fast one. She started jitterbugging with me - but just very nice and easy, not corny. She was really good. All you had to do was touch her. And when she turned around, her pretty little butt twitched so nice and all. She knocked me out. I mean it. I was about half in love with her by the time we sat down. That's the thing about girls, Every time they do something pretty, even if they're not much to look at, or they're sort of stupid, you fall in love, and then you never know where the hell you are.⁹

Finally, adolescents want to discuss ways of learning to deal more effectively with their feelings and realistically face the problems as they are encountered. Coupled with this is understanding the implications of choosing a future life. Western society confuses the young person with

⁹J. D. Salinger, The Catcher in the Rye. p. 95.

mixed attitudes. Young people are expected to assume adult responsibilities on the one hand, and yet, on the other hand, they are often treated as children. The adolescent needs to hope for a different kind of life and feel that he can succeed; that his dreams can be realized and he can try to fulfill those dreams. Not only the group counseling situation is an important factor here, but even more so, the family needs to be the foundation on which the adolescent can learn to understand the implications of choosing a future life and the responsibilities that go with that life. One writer has expressed the importance of the family with these words:

It is often difficult in transient times to create within the family structure a strong, positive conviction; and yet all of us are aware of how important it is that the family be able to have a conviction about some special, basic way of life.¹⁰

¹⁰J. Cotter Hirschberg, "Today's Family: A Balance of Strengths and Weaknesses," Science Digest, LKV (March 1969), p. 63.

CHAPTER V

THE LEADER AND HIS TASKS

Working with youth in a group counseling situation can be a joyous and rewarding experience that can far outweigh the frustrations. To lead the adolescent it is necessary to have a warm attraction for him and a great deal of competence. Young people must be interesting to the chaplain, just as life is, if he is going to interest and hold the group together in a counseling situation.

There are basic personal characteristics that the leader must possess. He must respect the young person as a fellow human being, and he himself must be a real, honest, and genuine person. The leader must also be observant to the moods and behavior of other adolescents, sensitive to the needs of the group, certain about his own standards yet willing to consider the standards of others, and willing to admit his own personal mistakes as well as his limitations of knowledge. Above all, the chaplain must respect the confidences of the adolescents, if he is going to experience any success in his counseling. One author expresses the confidential matter this way:

Counselors are told details of adolescents' feelings towards their parents, details of sexual behavior, details of hopes, fears, likes, and dislikes which the counselee would knowingly tell no other person on earth except another equally competent counselor. . . . Not only must the counselor refrain from betraying such confidences directly through revealing them to other teachers, counselors, or the like; he must take care also not to reveal the imparted information even though the name of the boy or girl involved is not revealed.¹¹

¹¹Thomas F. Staton, Dynamics of Adolescent Adjustment. p. 506.

Not only are there basic personal characteristics but there are also basic qualities that the leader must possess. The leader is a follower. By that we mean he is responsive to the needs of his group, and he helps them find out where the group needs to go and then follows them there.

The leader is also a catalyst and several qualities are necessary which can make the counselor effective. He is flexible and always ready to change plans when dictated by the group. He respects individual contributions and opinions by listening carefully. And he is willing to remain in the background, keeping the discussion centered on what others think rather than just giving his own opinions.

The leader is also a helper. He helps the young person, but not necessarily by telling that adolescent what he wants or needs to know. Experience has proven that help can be given by just listening rather than giving advice.

Furthermore, the leader is a listener who communicates "I care" rather than a judgment. By trying to listen to the young person the counselor overcomes a significant barrier in the "generation gap." A well-known doctor states:

I think we have failed our youth by having failed to listen - or, having listened, failed to hear.¹²

Also by not mentally judging a young person's position as immature, extreme, or inexperienced, the counselor will avoid the tendency to "turn off" what the adolescent is saying.

Another task of the leader is to avoid forcing the adolescent to participate. "Coming on strong" will cause the person to set up walls of

¹²Menninger, "What Troubles Our Troubled Youth," Mental Hygiene. p. 323.

defense such as apathy, silence, laughter, small talk, open hostility, or rebellion. Instead, the leader needs to set up an atmosphere of trust in which the group participant can come out of his protective shell at his own time and speed.

An additional task of the leader is to listen specifically for those "little things" which make every person unique. The counselor needs to be alert to those things said which each individual young person feels is important, and then he needs to secretly try to compliment the person.

Finally, it is important to note that the practice of counseling is more an art than it is a science. A lot of successful counseling, whether it is individual or in a group, is done by gut feelings on the part of chaplains. Their aim is to prepare individuals to accept reality and be a part of that reality. Thus the chaplain's personality plays a vital role in the total counseling situation. It takes a special kind of person to be a special kind of counselor with youth. All the scientific training in the world cannot give to a chaplain as counselor that special quality which is innate in him. One author has put it this way:

There is an increasing recognition that the personality of the leader is a vitally important component in his effectiveness and that the setting in which he works will play an important part in limiting or realizing his potential.¹³

As a chaplain I believe that the biblical perspective of ministry commits me to encourage youth to play their role as members of Christ's serving community. This is where the life and mission of the Church is honestly faced, where the mighty deeds of God are celebrated, and where His missionary corps is sustained in common worship by an ever-present Lord.

¹³MacLennan and Felsenfeld, Group Counseling and Psychotherapy with Adolescents. p. 176.

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